

# The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution

## Extracts

### 1. Introduction

The increased tempo of struggle in our country in the last few years has stimulated a great deal of theoretical debate and political discussion among those in the very front line of the upsurge. Workers in the factories, youth in the townships, mass and underground activists, radical intellectuals, cadres of Umkhonto we Sizwe, militants at all levels are seeking answers to the pressing strategic, tactical and organisational questions of the day. Increasing numbers of our people understand the essence of Lenin's political maxim: **Without revolutionary theory, there can be no real revolutionary movement.**

These discussions and debates keep coming back, in one way or another, to certain fundamentals: class struggle and national struggle, the question of stages of struggle, inter-class alliances, and the role of our working class in the liberation front. Many of these debates are between people who share common starting points; a belief that national domination is linked to capitalism and an acceptance of the goal of a socialist South Africa. But there is not always clarity on the most effective tactical road towards this goal.

A tendency, loosely described as 'workerism', denies that the main content of the immediate conflict is national liberation which it regards as a diversion from the class struggle. Even if it admits the relevance of national domination in the exploitative processes, **'workerism' insists on a perspective of an immediate struggle for socialism.**

A transitional stage of struggle, involving inter-class alliances, is alleged to lead to an abandonment of socialist perspectives and to a surrender of working class leadership. The economic struggles between workers and bosses at the point of production (which inevitably spill over into the broader political arena) is claimed to be the 'class struggle'. This is sometimes coupled with a view that the trade union movement is the main political representative of the working class.

A more sophisticated version of the left-workerist position has recently surfaced among union-linked academics. This version concedes the need for inter-class alliances but puts forward a view of working class political organisation more appropriate to a trade union than a revolutionary political vanguard.

At the other end of this debate there are views which tend to erect a chinese wall between the struggle for national liberation and social emancipation. **Our struggle is seen as 'bourgeois-democratic' in character so that the immediate agenda should not go beyond the objective of a kind of 'de-raced' capitalism.** According to this view there will be time enough after apartheid is destroyed to then turn our attention to the struggle for socialism. Hence there should be little talk of our ultimate socialist objectives. The working class should not insist on the inclusion of **radical** social measures as part of the immediate agenda because that would risk frightening away potential allies against apartheid.

## **2. Class Struggle and National Struggle**

The national democratic revolution — the present stage of struggle in our country is a revolution of the **whole oppressed people**. This does not mean that the oppressed 'people' can be regarded as a single or homogeneous entity. The main revolutionary camp in the immediate struggle is made up of different classes and strata (overwhelmingly black) which suffer varying forms and degrees of national oppression and economic exploitation. The camp of those who benefit from, and support, national domination is also divided into classes.

**But, in general, it remains true that our National Democratic Revolution expresses the broad objective interests not only of the working class but also of most of the other classes within the nationally-dominated majority, including the black petit-bourgeoisie and significant strata of the emergent black bourgeoisie.** This reality provides the foundation for a struggle which aims to mobilise to its side all the oppressed classes and strata as participants in the national liberation alliance.

We believe that the working class is both an indispensable part and the leading force of such a liberation alliance. But its relations with other classes and strata cannot be conditional on the acceptance by them of socialist aims. The historic programme which has evolved to express the common immediate aspirations of all the classes of the oppressed people is the Freedom Charter. This document is not, in itself, a programme for socialism, even though (as we argue later) it can provide a basis for **uninterrupted advance to a socialist future**.

If we pose the question by asking only whether our struggle is a national struggle or a class struggle, we will inevitably get a wrong answer. The right question is: what is the **relationship** between these two categories. A failure to understand the **class**

**content of the national struggle and the national content of the class struggle** in existing conditions can hold back the advance of both the democratic and socialist transformations which we seek.

The immediate primacy of the struggle against race tyranny flows from the concrete realities of our existing situation. The concept of national domination is not a mystification to divert us from class approaches; it infects every level of class exploitation. Indeed, it divides our working class into colour compartments. Therefore, unusual categories such as 'white working class' and 'black working class' are not 'unscientific' but simply describe the facts.

Class struggle in a period of capitalist hegemony is, in the long run, a political struggle for the ultimate winning of power by the working people. But the content of this class struggle does not remain fixed for all time; it is dictated by the concrete situation at a given historical moment. We cannot confine the meaning of class struggle to those rare moments when the immediate winning of socialist power is on the agenda. When workers engage in the national struggle to destroy race domination they are surely, at the same time, engaging in class struggle.

Class struggle does not fade into the background when workers forge alliances with other class forces on commonly agreed minimum programmes. The history of all struggles consists mainly of such interim phases. What is the essence of conflict during such phases if not class struggle? There is no such thing as 'pure' class struggle and those who seek it can only do so from the isolating comfort of a library arm-chair. The idea that social revolutions involve two neatly-labelled armies was dealt with by Lenin with bitter irony:

'So one army lines up in one place and says "we are for socialism" and another, somewhere else and says, "we are for imperialism", and that will be a social revolution! ... Whoever expects a "pure" social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is'. (*Collected Works*, Volume 22, pp. 355-6).

Nor are we putting off the socialist revolution by an emphasis on the National Democratic objectives of the immediate phase of struggle. In the words of Lenin, answering critics of Bolshevik policy on the primacy of the democratic revolution, 'we are not putting (the socialist revolution) off but are taking the first steps towards it in the only possible way, along with the correct path, namely the path of a democratic republic' (*Selected Works*, Volume 1, p.435). Our immediate emphasis on the struggle for democracy and 'People's Power' is an essential prerequisite for the longer-term advance towards a socialist transformation.

## **The Black Middle Strata and the Emerging Black Bourgeoisie**

**It is obvious** that the black capitalist class favours capitalism and that it will do its best to influence the post-apartheid society in this direction.

**It is obvious** that the black middle and upper classes who take part in a broad liberation alliance will jostle for hegemony and attempt to represent their interests as the interests of all Africans.

**It is obvious** that (like their counterparts in every part of the world) the black middle and upper strata, who find themselves on the side of the people's struggle, are often inconsistent and vacillating. They are usually the enemy's softest targets for achieving a reformist, rather than a revolutionary, outcome.

All this is pretty obvious. But it is equally obvious that if the working class and its vanguard and mass organisations were to get locked up with themselves, the greatest harm would be done to the cause of both national liberation and social emancipation. **By rejecting class alliances and going it alone, the working class would in fact be surrendering the leadership of the national struggle to the upper and middle strata.** This would become the shortest route towards a sell-out reformist solution and a purely capitalist post-apartheid South Africa under the hegemony of a bourgeois-dominated black national movement. Along this path, 'class purity' will surely lead to class suicide and 'socialist'-sounding slogans will actually hold back the achievement of socialism.

The question is not whether they are participants in the struggle. The real question is whether the working class, by refusing to establish a common trench, helps push them right into the enemy's lap. On the other hand, by engaging with them on common minimum platforms, the working class is able to forge a stronger opposition and also to neutralise some of the negative potential of the middle class.

## **Bourgeois-democratic or National-democratic?**

There is a distinction between the social content of our National Democratic Revolution and socialist transformation. For reasons which are special to our own situation, the present phase of our revolution contains elements of both national and social emancipation; it is not the classic bourgeois-democratic revolution nor is it yet the socialist revolution. This is so because of the unique relationship between capitalist exploitation and national domination in South Africa.

In the world as a whole, capitalist exploitation does not necessarily involve race domination. But the historically-evolved connection between capitalist exploitation and race domination in South Africa creates a link between national liberation and social emancipation. In our conditions you don't have to be a doctrinaire Marxist to conclude that a liberation which deals only with a rearrangement of the voting system and leaves undisturbed the race monopoly of 99% of our wealth, is no liberation at all. Any honest black nationalist understands that white political privilege has been the device to create and protect white economic privilege.

It is therefore impossible to imagine any real form of national liberation which does not, at the same time, involve a fundamental rearrangement of the ownership and distribution of wealth. Even Gavin Relly, the current boss of Anglo-American, was forced to declare:

'There is quite justifiable emphasis on the part of black South Africans on a more equitable distribution of wealth, to compensate for the errors of omission and commission of apartheid'(sic). (*Sunday Times* 1.6.86)

It is precisely our Party's emphasis on the economic content of our National Democratic Revolution which has contributed so much towards the spread of revolutionary nationalism. And it is for the same reason that the Party has won such an important place in the liberation alliance and gained so much popularity among the workers and youth as an independent vanguard.

The shortest route to socialism in our country is via a democratic state. But it will be a democratic state which will at once be required to implement economic measures which go far beyond bourgeois-democracy. These economic measures, dictated by the most elementary objectives of our national liberation struggle, will erect a favourable framework for a socialist transformation but will not, in themselves, create, or necessarily lead to, socialism.

A speedy advance towards socialism will depend, primarily, on the place which the working class has won for itself as a leader of society.

## **Trade Unions and the Working Class**

A trade union is the prime mass organisation of the working class. To fulfil its purpose, it must be as broad as possible and fight to maintain its legal status. It must attempt, in the first place, to unite, on an industrial basis, all workers (at whatever level of political consciousness) who understand the elementary need to come together and defend and advance their economic conditions. It cannot demand more as a condition of membership. But because the state and its political and repressive apparatus is an instrument of the dominant economic classes, it is impossible for trade unions in any part of the world to keep out of the broader political conflict.

Especially in our country, where racist domination and capitalist exploitation are two sides of the same coin, it is even more clear that a trade union cannot stand aside from the liberation struggle. Indeed, the trade union movement is the most important mass contingent of the working class. Its organised involvement in struggle, both as an independent force and as part of the broad liberation alliance, undoubtedly reinforces the dominant role of the workers as a class. In addition, trade unions' and workers' experience of struggle in unions provide the most fertile field in which to school masses of workers in socialist understanding and political consciousness.

The very fact that the workers' economic struggle cannot be separated from the struggle against national domination has helped to blur the border-line between trade unionism and the political leadership of the working class as a whole. It is, however, vital to maintain the distinction between trade union politics and overall revolutionary leadership. A trade union cannot carry out this dual role; if it attempted to do so it would have to change its basic character and risk committing suicide as a mass legal force. In addition, the very nature and purpose of trade unionism disqualifies it from carrying out the tasks of a revolutionary vanguard.[9]

The syndicalist notion that trade unions should act as political parties is so discredited that it has few, if any, open adherents. But, from time to time, the notion is introduced through the back door in the shape of policies which would, in practice, allocate such a role to the trade union movement.

Unlike a trade union, a worker's vanguard does not, and should not, have the character of a mass movement. An attempt to apply trade union organisational practices to such a vanguard would spell the end of revolutionary political leadership in our conditions. Equally, the trade union movement would be doomed if it attempted to act like a Communist Party.

## **The ANC and the Working Class**

The main core of the whole democratic struggle illegal and legal is the ANC which stands at the head of the liberation alliance. As head of this alliance and prime representative of all the oppressed, it welcomes within its ranks all from whatever class they come who support and are ready to fight for the aims of the Freedom Charter. It is a revolutionary nationalist organisation with popular roots. It is not, however, 'populist'. The ANC's Strategy and Tactics recognises that there are different classes among the people with different long-term aspirations.

The overwhelming majority of the people are working class. This explains why the ANC's composition and policies show a strong bias towards the working class. It also considers it proper and necessary for socialist ideology to be discussed and understood in its ranks. But, despite the fact that the ANC has an understandable bias towards the working class it does not, and clearly should not, adopt a socialist platform which the so-called Marxist Workers' Tendency (expelled from the ANC) would like it to do. If it adopted such a platform it would destroy its character as the prime representative of all the classes among the oppressed black majority.

At the same time, for reasons already outlined, its revolutionary nationalism does, of necessity, contain a social content which reflects our specific national liberation aspirations a content which will ultimately facilitate the socialist transformation but is not premised on it. Worker participation in the ANC is one of the important ways in which our working class plays its role in the democratic revolution. But, above all, the tripartite alliance, moulded in the revolutionary underground, between the ANC, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and our SACP, represents a framework which expresses the political interests of our working class in the broad front of struggle.

## **The SACP and the Working Class**

Workers' political leadership must represent the working class not just in economic struggles against the bosses but, more so, in its relation to all classes of society and to the state as an organised force. We stress again that a trade union cannot carry out this role. Only a political vanguard of the working class can do so.

A vanguard party, representing the historic aspirations of the working class, cannot (like a trade union) have a mass character. It must attract the most advanced representatives of the working class; mainly professional revolutionaries with an understanding of Marxist theory and practice, an unconditional dedication to the worker's cause, and a readiness, if need be, to sacrifice their very lives in the cause of freedom and socialism. Our SACP is such a Party.

**There is no organised force in our country's history which has matched our Party's contribution to the spread of genuine workers' organisation at the point of production. We can truly claim to be the parent of black trade unionism.**

A strong trade union movement and a workers' political vanguard such as ours are essential conditions for the kind of victory in the democratic revolution which will find a working class equipped organisationally and ideologically to assert its historic role. But we emphasise again that there is both a distinction and a harmony in the character and roles of these two vital sectors. Each has a specific role to play in advancing the interests of our working class as an independent social force and as the leading class in the immediate struggle to build a united, non-racial and democratic South Africa.

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